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ABSTRACT

Although the situation is changing, rural America has been the scene of declining opportunity for 50 years. For the many rural females left behind in communities depleted by outmigration, there are limited opportunities and few role models besides that of wife, mother, and farm woman. The role of farm woman is demanding, self satisfying, and crucial to the well being of the family enterprise, yet not considered productive in economic terms. Most rural women come from a strong, resourceful tradition. They provide a social link to the community and a work hand on the farm whenever necessary. However, there are many rural women who face isolation, depression, and despair every day; it is these women who must be given hope. Work transition strategies for rural youth should involve the recognition and the respect of the work that women do, and the realization that being a farm wife is a probable vocation for many rural girls. Women should be brought into the planning processes and school staff should be aware of and respect Title IX, the basic anti-sex discrimination in education statute. The most sensible strategies involve continuing current practices such as the 4-H Club and Green Thumb, which provide creative school-to-work transition experiences for both boys and girls. (SB)

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The Role of Women in Rural
Youth Transitions

by

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The Role of Women in Rural Youth Transitions

There are going to be substantial changes in rural society in the next decade that will reverse the deterioration and impoverishment that have been characteristics of rural life for the past 40 or 50 years, it is my belief. These changes will be brought on by changing economic conditions, changing cultural patterns affecting peripheral societies much as they have the central urban societies, and changing values along with the rest of American society.

The economic backbone of rural communities are the primary producers, the extractive industries, forestry and agriculture. They must and will finally come into their own as increased population and decreased resources, national and world, finally bring demand into closer balance with supply. The slight overproduction that has produced such destructive price depressants will probably evaporate. Farmers will become more organized and develop greater bargaining power in the marketing of their production. Farm labor and forest labor is organizing also. Mineral and energy shortages will bring marginal and sub-marginal mines back into production. Pressures on recreational land will force governments to provide more parks with expanded recreational facilities.

Industrial development in rural areas progresses as manufacturers leave the social problems of the cities to seek a workforce in the country, unorganized and still more-or-less imbued with the work ethic.

Fossil fuel energy costs will drive production costs in mechanized agricultural production high enough that human labor can compete with machines in food and fiber production.

Population migration to small towns will revitalize these markets and create demand for more personal services and government services. The new rural population appears to be coming from cities so it is not too far fetched to presume that these people have a certain sophistication of expectations and demands and the know-how to make government respond to these demands. An increased demand

for housing, schools, telephones, auto repair etc. will also develop.

Technological development of electronic communication and information retrieval devices, computers etc. makes it possible for certain kinds of professional work to be done far away from the urban centers. Research projects and studies, communicating with clients and colleagues can be done with the telephone and these other devices.

And there is the phenomenon of the "back to the earth and the simple life" movement. Middle-class young adults, often college educated and frequently subsidized by family money or public funds, have been colonizing rural communities. How lasting and how profound the impact is hard to predict. Certainly in areas where there is a concentration of these people, there has been social and political impact on the locality. There is a hill country county in Wisconsin about 40 miles from the University of Wisconsin in which the small, poor, sub-marginal but picturesque dairy farms were bought up by college professors and well-heeled young "intellectuals". This new group has now organized politically to impose zoning restrictions to impede further development and population growth in order to keep the area as picturesque as when it arrived. The residual original residents are frustrated by the restrictions in their attempts to profit from the increased land values by selling building sites on their farms.

There are developments among other groups in Rural America which will change the outlook and opportunity of the young of these groups.

Migrant farm labor is a diminishing population as agricultural harvesting is mechanized and farm managers and employers develop techniques to utilize labor more effectively throughout the year. In the upper middlewest in fruit and vegetable production, many of the migrants have settled in a town or city and migrate from crop to crop within the state. In Wisconsin, they may go from peas to cherries to potatoes to tomatoes from a home base in Racine, Milwaukee

or Wautoma. This pattern changes and improves the educational opportunity for their children and should improve job opportunities also. In California and the border states that have the Spanish latifundia pattern of agriculture, the use of illegal aliens has undercut development of a settled labor force although here also, it is beginning. It can be assumed, however, that if employment of illegals is prohibited and the organization of farm workers continues apace, more stable lives and improved family resources will evolve for those migrant farm laborers also. Women often are farm laborers, however they seldom rise to the supervisory jobs even though superior strength is not a requirement.

Native Americans are in the process of withdrawal from their dependance on the central bureaucracies and starting to run their own shows. This development is showing up in Native Alaskan tribes as well. The outlook for women and girls in these more traditional societies for transition into paying jobs in this withdrawal period probably is not very good; however there are signs of "sisterhood" organizing there also. Native American women may do as black women have done--identify with the rising self-assertiveness of the group until a certain point and then begin to identify with women in other groups.

All this is to say that there should be more work opportunities for rural youth in the future than there has been in the past and that the rural scene presents a challenge to community developers.

For the past 50 years, rural America has been a world of declining opportunity. Mechanization in the extractive industries and agriculture, consolidation of farms into larger units, depopulation of rural towns and the concomitant loss of stores, banks and filling stations, consolidation of rural schools, abandonment of rural churches, all diminished the chances for a young person to make a living in the country. They left in droves. For example, in recent years only 15 percent of the young people trained in Montana's vocational schools were able to find work and stay in that state. Rural youth were counseled to go and when educated, were educated to go. The primary transition to work problem was to learn to live in a new and different community.

The best and the brightest left the fastest.

Many women and girls were left behind. The percentage of single heads of households in non-metropolitan areas is almost as great as metropolitan. The percentage of women in the work force is close also; but the wages are lower for them than in metropolitan centers and the upper limits are very low.

Those left behind in the depleted communities were the least likely prospects for leadership and role models. Rural ministers are old and have problems that make them unfit for more demanding urban parishes, or if perhaps they have something to offer, they usually move on. If there are any doctors, they also tend to be old and "through".

There never were many role models for girls except that of wife/mother. That hoary employment option, the constant for so many generations, the school teacher, had gone to town with the consolidated school and turned into a male principal. Clerking and bookkeeping jobs evaporated with the villages. The remaining jobs in small factories, textile mills, fast food drive-ins were low paying, far from home, often night work and with no future. Flextime, part time, shared jobs are no new things in rural employment. I have seen many families in which one parent worked nights, the other days, and sometimes carried the children in the car to swap them. Women develop complicated mutual-help child care arrangements so they can work for cash wages. "Networking", and mutual support groups defined and labeled by the woman's movement are old as the hills back in the hills.

The farm woman had one of the most demanding and satisfying lives to be led by rural women if the farm survived the economic ringer agriculture has gone through in this period. Even though law and custom doesn't recognize her work as productive, and the economists do not count it in the GNP, and the skills acquired are not accepted in the job market place, she plays a crucial role in the family economic enterprise. It is my impression that on the whole, she knows it

In many farm communities, the girls and women have developed better social skills than the males. Girls stayed in high school longer than boys because there were no employment opportunities for them in the unskilled heavy labor jobs available in agriculture and road crews to the boys. Moreover their labor on the home farm was not the career training it was for their brothers because the girls could have no hopes for "taking over" the farm from the parents unless there were no brothers. Therefore girls had contact with the town longer and had to seek jobs there more than did boys. In 1970, male farm laborers and supervisors completed an average of 8.1 years of school--- female farm laborers and supervisors, 11.9 years according to the U.S. Census. I know many farm families in which the wife writes the letters, makes the telephone calls, keeps the books, negotiates with the co-ops, and pays the farm workers if there are any. She is also required to co-sign all the mortgage notes even though even this does not enhance her claim to joint ownership of the farm, and even though it is unlikely she could get a loan if she were a widow or unmarried. In the farm population, females have more education than males if neither has post-secondary education; but males have more schooling than females if either has gone on to school.

There has been an explosion of women in agricultural school in recent years and the transition for them into farming will be difficult indeed. Most will probably go into agri-business in some capacity. It is difficult enough for young men to start farming because of the capital requirements, but for young women it is hopeless unless they inherit the family farm or marry a farmer. Never-the-less, the number of women managers and owners is growing and has been predicted to be one in ten by 1980. Germane to this paper however, is the premise that a farm wife is a farmer, has a job with real income, and needs education, training and counseling in many skills to successfully perform her job, and that she is entitled to them.

An explanation for the resistance of farm women to the shriller aspects of the women's movement is that they share too thoroughly with their husbands the rearing of the children, the

farm management decisions, the clerical chores and record keeping, and the hard work in the barn and fields to identify with the suburban housewife's isolation—isolated from their husband's work and relegated to raising the children alone.

When farm women discovered that inflation in land values had pushed the value of their farms far above earning abilities, and that under estate tax law, their years of labor on the farm gave them no claim to its ownership, they formed their own women's movement. Many women have had to sell the farm on which they worked shoulder to shoulder with their husbands to pay estate taxes upon his death if they could not prove monetary contribution to its purchase and development. A surviving husband faces no such nonsense. When to support herself and her family after selling the farm to pay the estate taxes, the farm woman tries to get a job, she discovers the world of age and sex discrimination and the discounting and unemployability of her family, farm and homemaking skills. A great deal of expanding sister-hood is a result of these "tribal customs". Many farm women not facing widowhood are questioning the equity in the supposition that a man's labor on the farm is productive work in economic terms while a woman's labor is not. The question is an effective consciousness raiser.

Strategies

I believe there is less rigidity in rural life than is generally presumed. There is a changing of the guard going on. The old, inadequate, left behind political and social leaders are dying out and being pushed out by a new generation. Perhaps more important is the rediscovery on the part of rural and perceptive urban people of the values and strengths in rural life. This discovery has been fostered, perhaps even started, by the changes and developments described earlier in this paper. When people feel good about themselves, they are more receptive to change. I think the environmental movement has affected the way rural people look at their natural surroundings. They see new beauty in the balance. They also are beginning to appreciate their own skills

and folk arts that an earlier period denigrated. They see the growing numbers that are clamoring to share their environment and to learn their arts.

And so it would seem that the most sensible education to work transition strategies for girls and boys would be to go with what is already going on, if that change is heading the right direction. Recognize the work that women do is work and respect it. Recognize that farming in a marriage partnership is a real and probable vocation for many rural girls and city girls also. Farm women should be appointed to the Work-Education Councils. County agents, 4-H leaders, home economist extension workers are all functionaries who work with rural people and are probably more receptive to new approaches and less uptight about feminism than small town ministers, high school principals or local politicians and yet they are respected members of the community and already engaged in the work of change.

4-H Clubs have a good record of non-sex stereotyping. Both sexes engage in all projects and as many girls are raising calves as boys; moreover boys are in the cooking projects. 4-H projects were useful school to work transition experiences for farm youth; they are now broadened in scope and many clubs sponsor town job related projects.

Green Thumb is an employment program originally developed for older Americans and is funded by CETA and the Older Americans Act under the sponsorship of the Farmers Union. A new program is being planned to employ rural youth to work with the old Green Thumbs in hopes that the young ones will learn skills, disciplines, and get infected with the work ethic. This is creative school to work transition planning. Green Thumb has a good record of affirmative action in hiring.

Most homemakers are mothers, and most mothers have daughters, and most mothers want those daughters to have it better than they had it. Leaders of Homemakers clubs are good candidates for membership in the Councils. The clubs, sponsored by the Extension

Service, are a potential resource for woman power in collaborative projects.

Rural women come from a tradition of work, strength and resourcefulness -- in a family unit with all members interdependent. They seldom had the chance to be idle and to wear expensive ornaments to prove the success of their husband, yet their husband's and family's success depended in no small way on the competence and character of the wife. My grandmother would say that a poor housewife could throw more food out the back door on a teaspoon than a strong man could carry in the front door on his back. Avoid a stereotyped picture of the rural woman -- sunbonnet, clay pipe, uneducated, simple, poor and folksy. They hate it and resent it. While the abominable bee-hive hair-do persisted in rural fashion beyond endurable limits, and is only recently meeting the demise it deserves, it was a signal to the world that all was not simple and rustic down on the back roads -- that even out there, structures of amazing engineering complexity could be constructed by one woman to adorn another.

Women maintain the extended family relationships, do the communicating between town and country, have the networking clubs and social gatherings, organize and expedite the family's chores and extra-curricular activities, know more about the work in the barn and the fields than the men know about the work in the house and kitchen. And in many families, they are also wage earners.

They are also in many rural communities the child mother, the girl who sees so little opportunity for herself that getting pregnant is the most creative thing she can do. A rural sociologist at Texas A & M describes the self-image of rural girls of Mexican descent as abysmally low. A member of the staff at the Northwest Educational Research Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, thinks the mental set of the rural woman in eastern Oregon and Washington is close to "total despair". The isolation, depression, resignation and despair are also facts of life for many girls in rural America.

The answer is to give them hope. Young women with job opportunities do not often get pregnant. Indian women working to change the low self-image of young Wisconsin tribal girls started a counseling service for junior high school girls to catch them young and give them hope before they got trapped in the babies and dependency syndrome. It happens so early for many.

There are many rural Americas and they are quite different. Each will need a different approach but in each, it would be wise to bring women leaders into the planning and collaborative process. They can be found in women's clubs and small businesses and neighborhood planning committees.

No one wants the young to leave and especially the parents don't if their children can find decent work at home. It is no fun when there are no young and no babies around. It is a human need to build on and use and may provide energy for youth transition to work efforts.

Community Work-Education Councils should be informed of Title IX, the basic anti-sex discrimination in education statute and encouraged to see that principals, teachers and counselors are also informed of the law and respect it. The absence of sex stereotyping in the schools curriculum enhances the chance for successful promulgation of equal roles to women in society.

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